



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Melo* by Alain Resnais

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*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4. (Summer, 1988), pp. 24-27.

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*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

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# Reviews

## MELO

Directed and adapted by Alain Resnais from a play by Henry Bernstein. Photography: Charlie Van Damme, Gilbert Duhalde. Editing: Albert Jurgenson, Jean-Pierre Besnard.

Alain Resnais is an anomaly among modern film-makers, having become celebrated as an *auteur* but not as a screenwriter: his films are either adapted from literary sources or based on original scripts for which he shares no credit. His reputation as an *auteur* rests in part on his choice of scripts, in which he aims for intellectual challenge and subtle political awareness, and in part on a conspicuous directorial style that involves leaps between different times, different places, and different modes of reality. It may therefore seem hard to explain why, with *Mélo*, he has chosen to make a faithful screen version of a dated bourgeois play.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Bernstein's *Mélo* is a 1929 French counterpart of a "well-made" Broadway play (and indeed it was soon translated to Broadway)—a psychological drama involving a sexual triangle between bourgeois characters. Romaine (played in the film by Sabine Azéma) is married to Pierre (Pierre Arditi), leader of the Colonne orchestra, who as a student was a close friend of Marcel (André Dussolier), now a world-famous violinist. She meets Marcel for the first time when Pierre invites him to dinner, and is fascinated when he tells of his love for a woman who may or may not have cheated on him but whom he finally gave up because she lied to him. Romaine contrives a meeting with Marcel at his apartment: a pianist, she accompanies him in a Brahms sonata, and also falls helplessly in love with him. Marcel, flattered but cautious, responds; however, he is leaving for a concert tour the following day. By the time he returns, Romaine is in a desperate state: she is slowly poisoning Pierre even though she feels affection for him, and is about to be exposed by a doctor called in by Pierre's cousin Christiane, who is in love with him. Romaine writes a farewell letter to Pierre and drowns herself. Christiane (Fanny Ardant, in an uncharacteristically subdued role), who suspected both the poisoning and the affair with Marcel, is advised by a priest to say nothing to Pierre,

since it would only prolong his grief. Time passes. Pierre, now married to Christiane, calls on Marcel, whom he has not seen since Romaine's funeral. He has come to the conclusion that Romaine killed herself because she fell in love with Marcel and was rejected. Marcel denies; Pierre insists. As Pierre cites more and more evidence for his conclusion, Marcel realizes that Romaine must have loved him with absolute fidelity. Overcome by emotion, he tells Pierre that he is upset because a woman he loves is breaking up with him. Pierre apologizes for his insistence, and the film ends as the two men play the Brahms sonata together.

The film begins with a hand turning the pages of a program to show the main credits; then the sounds of a theater audience accompany the image of a stage curtain (which returns at the end of each act). The curtain dissolves to reveal an obvious stage set—Romaine and Pierre's suburban back yard, where they and Marcel are dining in front of a backdrop of moon and stars. Resnais's changes to the original dialogue and stage directions are no more, and possibly less, than a theater director would make—such as the elimination of a servant and the substitution of Brahms for Lekeu. Rather than open up the action, Resnais has chosen to keep it enclosed: of three brief exterior scenes that appear in the original, he includes only two. Each of the other scenes not only retains its chronological order but unfolds in virtually unbroken real time.

In spite of all these apparent handicaps, *Mélo* is a remarkable accomplishment, and audiences both at the New York Film Festival press screening and in a New York theater were held silent by it. What accounts for its success? There is no obvious originality, as in Resnais's earliest feature films. For one thing, *Mélo* has been adapted to the screen on at least four previous occasions, three times by Paul Czinner (in French, German, and—as *Dreaming Lips*—in English) and once by Robert Land and Giorgio Simonelli (in Italian), all in the 1930s. As for Resnais's emphasis on the play's stage origins, Cocteau incorporated both the theatrical curtain and fidelity to dialogue in the 1948 adaptation of his play *Les Parents terribles*.

However, Resnais's use of the camera, lighting, editing, and other cinematic elements in *Mélo* is quite different from Cocteau's in *Les Parents terribles*. Cocteau enters the play with



MELO: Marcel, Romaine, and Pierre in a nightclub.

a rapid wipe from the theater curtain to a shock close-up of the father in a SCUBA mask, whereas Resnais gently discloses the back-yard set. At the end, Cocteau dollies back from the family home to depict it as a kind of gipsy caravan, and a narrative voiceover so describes it; Resnais simply dissolves from Pierre and Marcel to the final curtain. In between, though the action of *Les Parents terribles* stays within two apartments, Cocteau contrives much more variety than in *Mélo*—more movement and business with props (involving five main characters instead of three), more rapid dialogue, more frequent cutting, and bursts of ironic humor. As these contrasts imply, *Mélo* is a more rigorous and risky attempt to transfer a stage play to the screen.

Yet, paradoxically, the more closely *Mélo* is examined, the more clearly it reveals a family resemblance to Resnais's most experimental feature, *Last Year at Marienbad*. Both present frankly hermetic worlds; both make deliberate use of music; both depend on a triangle of two men and a woman. Although at first sight *Mélo* seems conservative, if not reactionary, alongside *Marienbad*, an investigation of the three areas of similarity reveals that the later film goes to even greater extremes.

In *Marienbad* the hermetic world extends to daylight exteriors; in *Mélo* it does not. The open-

ing scene is not only nocturnal but patently located inside a studio. When Romaine first visits Marcel's apartment, she comments on the fine view from his window—which consists entirely of small panes of colored and frosted glass. The only real exteriors in *Mélo* are the two brief scenes, also nocturnal, in which Romaine commits suicide, as if only impending death can breach the walls of her world.

Despite the artifice of its acting, *Marienbad* distances itself from the stage by including excerpts from a play called *Rosmer*: however hermetic the rest of the film may be, it at least takes place outside the confines of the theater. But *Mélo* is doubly enclosed: it begins in the auditorium and then systematically immures itself on the stage. The first shot of the back yard is from stage front; then the camera moves forward and pans right as Romaine carries dishes indoors. The next shot is frontal but closer. The next two shots are angled respectively from left and right. In succeeding shots the camera alternates between wider angles to left and right, approaching the 180° line between the imaginary wings. As Marcel recounts the story of the woman he couldn't trust, the camera edges slowly across the 180° lines. Then there is a brief shot of the three characters from "up-stage": in the background, where the curtain would have been, one can dimly see a studio

partition. We are not enclosed within a theatrical world within a world.

In the use of music, *Mariénbad* again seems the more audacious film. It deploys a conspicuous incidental score, including organ music that accompanies images of a chamber orchestra, whereas *Mélo* offers only diegetic fragments: two brief passages from Brahms's G major violin sonata, dance music with a nightclub interlude and a few snatches of song from Pierre and Romaine. In both films, however, music exerts an influence that goes beyond the notes played or sung. The images in *Mariénbad* often suggest a musical organization: rapid rhythmic cutting; flowing dolly shots like sinuous melismata; tableaux like sustained chords; and shots repeated either in succession, like musical figuration, or after a lapse of time, like a reprise. In *Mélo*, all three main characters are musicians, and music not only enters their conversation but also is associated with some of the most dramatic scenes. When Pierre collapses from the effect of Romaine's poison, he hits the keyboard of his piano, whose reverberation is prolonged through Romaine's reaction; and when, at the end of the film, Pierre visits Marcel and says he's quitting the orchestra, he again hits the piano keyboard, deliberately this time, but as if stricken by the poison of suspicion.

The most far-reaching influence of music on *Mélo* is in its structure. Whereas parts of *Mariénbad* reflect musical forms, the whole of *Mélo* can be compared to a chamber piece in three movements—the three acts into which the theatrical curtain divides the film. The piece is, of course, primarily a trio for Romaine, Pierre, and Marcel, whose voices are as distinct in timber and attack as piano, bassoon, and violin. Romaine speaks with staccato rapidity; Pierre has a slower, deeper, breathier voice; Marcel sustains longer phrases than the other two by means of a soft portamento.

This comparison to a musical trio may seem fanciful, but it is strongly supported by Resnais's filming strategy. To begin with, the controlled recording of the voices allows greater precision and opportunity for nuance than would be possible on the stage. In addition, Resnais has used the varied resources of film to throw emphasis on the three main characters and their voices. In nearly every scene the background and edges of the frame are in shadow, and light falls only on the character or charac-

ters in the center of the frame. There are no close-ups of objects, however significant: the bottle of drops that Romaine uses to poison Pierre, the rose petal that she kept in memory of Marcel, the final letter she writes to Pierre are all glimpsed only in the background, in shadow.

It is likewise the characters' voices that dominate the sound track. Aside from the brief musical episodes mentioned earlier, the sound effects are sparse and muted: on-scene sounds such as footsteps and clinking glasses are virtually eliminated, while the off-scene sounds amount to four bells, one door closing, a softly barking dog, the whirl of a passing car and the faint put-put of a river boat. Bernstein's dialogue plays a part, too. Though superficially realistic, it is far more carefully phrased than ordinary speech; Marcel's reminiscence, for example, involves an intricate combination of sensory and psychological detail that seems to have been inspired by his more celebrated namesake and suspicious lover, the narrator of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It is not surprising that three distinct voices, carefully given prominence on the sound track, and speaking stage dialogue of stylized realism, should take on the formal and emotional power of music.

With the third area of resemblance to *Mariénbad*—the triangle of two men and a woman—it should already be clear that *Mélo* gives far more substance to its three main characters. Yet Romaine, Pierre, and Marcel share one distinctive feature with the nameless characters in *Mariénbad*. As Alain Robbe-Grillet has pointed out, A, M, and X have no past or future: "Elsewhere, they don't exist. As for the past the hero introduces by force into this sealed, empty world, we sense he is making it up as he goes along."<sup>2</sup> To a large extent, the characters in *Mélo* are also cut off from any past or future by the theatrical curtain and their stage-like hermetic world. When the dialogue refers to the past, it serves only to motivate or reinforce present events, just as X's insistence on last year does in *Mariénbad*.

At the same time, as Sabine Azéma revealed at the New York Film Festival press conference, Resnais encouraged each player during rehearsals to imagine a past for his or her character. He also resisted any temptation to etiolate the characters by treating the play with irony. Thus

his deemphasis of all elements except the characters and their voices, which I cited among the film's musical qualities, also has a more direct consequence—that the characters gain an unusual density and resonance. Their bourgeois yearnings for happiness and love become a desire to break free of their hermetic world. Romaine dreams of a society where she could freely love both Pierre and Marcel; Marcel desires a relation in which he could receive (and perhaps offer) total honesty; Pierre, at the end, hopes to exorcise the past and make a fresh start. They form a triad of conflicting and complementary attributes that reflect many dimensions of the human condition. Seen in a political light, for example, Romaine reflects an impetuous revolutionary who is blind to consequences; Pierre, an innocent liberal who cannot believe in evil; Marcel, an incipient reactionary who cannot believe in good.

A summary of this detailed exploration of *Mélo* is enough to highlight Resnais's achievement. His apparently straightforward adapta-

tion of the play reveals an extreme formal audacity; his formalism, in turn, reveals an astonishing humanity.

—WILLIAM JOHNSON

#### NOTES

1. It seemed reasonable to ask Resnais for *his* explanation. Since he was busy working on three films simultaneously, an associate transmitted this reply on his behalf: "As always, there is no single answer to your question. Never having believed that theater and cinema are antagonistic, [Resnais] simply wished to try the experiment of transferring a play he liked to the screen. As he worked on it, he came to the conclusion that the charm of *Mélo* would disappear if he tried to open up the play with exterior scenes."
2. Introduction to the screenplay of *Last Year at Marienbad*, translated by Richard Howard, Grove, New York, 1962.



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